

# “SOLOMON’S SALACIOUS SONG”: FOUCAULT’S AUTHOR FUNCTION AND THE EARLY CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF THE *CANTICUM CANTICORUM*

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It is not accidental, I think, that the book is ascribed to Solomon.  
Gregory of Nyssa

## ABSTRACT

The transformation of the erotic Song of Songs into a mystical tract on the soul’s love for Christ was surely one of the great exegetical feats of late ancient Christianity. Recent work on the politics of meaning leads us to interrogate more closely the processes by which early Christian exegetes achieved that feat, and how their interpretations encoded and produced particular forms of socially mediated power and knowledge. Michel Foucault has proposed for modern literary criticism the interpretive mode of the “author function,” by which literary critics can domesticate or reject a text that is potentially transgressive. This “author function” supplied one method by which difficult canonical texts, like the Song of Songs, were tamed, and furthermore produced authoritative (and authorial) meaning that mediated contested boundaries of Christian cultural identity.

### *Introduction: Reading Author-ity*

Marvin H. Pope, author of the 1977 Anchor Bible commentary on the Song of Songs, declared with due alliteration:

From the early days of the Church Solomon’s salacious Song, which at first blush tended to appeal to the pernicious pruriency of men, women, and children, had to be interpreted in a way that would eliminate the evil impulse and transform and spiritualize carnal desire into a praise of virginity and celibacy and sexless passion of the human soul and/or the Church for God, and of God’s response in kind.<sup>1</sup>

While Pope provides a tidy link between early Christian concern for sexual purity<sup>2</sup> and the peculiar ascetic slant given to this “salacious” love song in Christian exegesis, more recent critical studies of the politics of interpretation should encourage us to question just how and why any text “has to be

<sup>1</sup> Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 114.

<sup>2</sup> Pope, *Song of Songs*, 113.

interpreted" in a particular way. Modes of reading and interpretation, especially of texts that have been imbued with authority in a community—like canonical scripture—can be used not just to reinforce and reproduce theological insight, but also "to endorse, revise, and subvert competing world views and forms of life."<sup>3</sup> It is difficult to read certain interpretive endeavors (such as early Christian allegorical interpretation that found suspiciously Platonic concepts in ancient Hebrew texts) and imagine that the interpreters are "merely" pulling theological wisdom from the text without recourse to non-Scriptural ideas and thought-worlds. It is equally difficult to read an interpretive text such as Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* without envisioning certain acts of Scriptural reading as aggressive, confrontational, and highly implicated in the conflicting social worlds of the interpreters.<sup>4</sup>

If we read early Christian interpretation of Scripture then not merely as the theological exploits of a few inspired exegetes, but as social texts informed by and encoding within them various cultural world-views in conflict, we can burrow deeper below the surface of these interpretive endeavors and navigate the twisting paths of cultural discourses. Michel Foucault, pioneer of "archaeological" forays into the intersection and function of such discourses, provides in an essay entitled "What is an Author?" a useful opening into the cultural strategies that emerge from the interpretation of such potentially difficult texts as the Song of Songs.<sup>5</sup> In this essay, Foucault suggests that the modern literary critical obituary for the "author" has been written prematurely. He maintains that a certain constructed phantom of the author lingers in literary criticism, as "a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction."<sup>6</sup> The author is not so much a source of creativity for the reader or interpreter, but rather a "principle of

<sup>3</sup> David Dawson, *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 1.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* 9.1: "You [Trypho] don't know what you're talking about; you've been persuaded by teachers who don't understand Scripture, and like a fortune-teller you say whatever comes to mind." Text in Edgar J. Goodspeed, *Die ältesten Apologeten: Texte mit kurzen Einleitungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1914), 100. For other similar remarks, in which Scriptural (mis-)interpretation is foundational to cultural conflict and attack, see esp. 34.1, 51.1, 57.1, and 142.1 (Goodspeed 128, 150, 160, 264).

<sup>5</sup> M. Foucault, "What is an Author?" in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984): 101-120; the English version of this essay originally appeared in Josué Harari, ed., *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structural Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979): 141-160. Page numbers herein refer to the Rabinow edition. See also Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972) where he also seeks to de-emphasize the role of a stable "author" in discursive production (92-95) but without discussion of the ideological significance of a constructed "author."

<sup>6</sup> Foucault, "What is an Author," 118-119.

thrift,"<sup>7</sup> controlling and delimiting the meanings which may be read into and out of texts.

The cultural motives necessitating the author function as described by Foucault seem quite appropriate to the interpretation of the Song of Songs. "Authors" of texts become necessary, Foucault explains, "to the extent that authors [become] subject to punishment, that is, to the extent that discourses [can] be transgressive";<sup>8</sup> a suitably accountable author can serve either to exclude a text from consideration altogether, or domesticate that text for fruitful interpretation. The potential harm in the Song of Songs is what Pope colorfully called the "appeal to the pernicious pruriency of men, women, and children." Related to this notion of authorial accountability is the larger idea of interpretive control: "the author is . . . the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning."<sup>9</sup> This fearful "proliferation of meaning" is precisely what Scriptural "experts" sought to contain by producing their learned, authoritative interpretations. If "Solomon" wrote the Song of Songs, and Solomon has certain characteristics (as explained by the interpreter) then certain mistaken meanings (those most problematic or transgressive) may be excluded. Here early Christian interpretive strategy also opens a window onto the complex process of Christian self-definition in antiquity. The author "Solomon" defines textual boundaries that will exclude not only certain readings, but also the egregious "others" who attempt those readings (Jews, pagans, or "unlearned" Christians). The function of the author inscribes a more complicated interpretive framework than reliance upon what has traditionally been called "authorial intent," and involves a certain plasticity and mutability. Foucault's author function "does not refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise simultaneously to several selves, to several subjects—positions that can be occupied by different classes of individuals."<sup>10</sup> Authority is made to inhere in the text itself, while the production of knowledge and truth within the nexus of that authority is hedged and delimited by the construction of an appropriate and stabilizing author. The "author's name,"<sup>11</sup> made to characterize certain ideas, concepts, and works within an *oeuvre*, becomes a critical tool to naturalize textual meaning. This authorial "simultaneity" can function within the multivalent interpretive work of a single exegete—as we shall see below—and also as a marker of discursive disjunction between various different interpretive authorities.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Foucault, "What is an Author," 118.

<sup>8</sup> Foucault, "What is an Author," 108.

<sup>9</sup> Foucault, "What is an Author," 119.

<sup>10</sup> Foucault, "What is an Author," 113.

<sup>11</sup> Foucault, "What is an Author," 107.

<sup>12</sup> The history of Jewish exegesis of the Song of Songs is noteworthy in this context: at

While Foucault focused on modern uses of the author function,<sup>13</sup> it is no great leap to find the same ideological deployment of the author function in ancient Christian interpretation of Scripture.<sup>14</sup> Foucault himself refers to Jerome's fourth century "criteria of authenticity" and concedes that they "do define the four modalities according to which *modern* criticism brings the author function into play."<sup>15</sup> I would go further and suggest that Foucault's discussion of this ideological author function in modern literary criticism may be fruitfully applied to a study of the social dimension of early Christian interpretation.<sup>16</sup> To this end I would like to examine how two early Christian exegetes, Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185-ca. 251) and Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 330-ca. 395), deploy this author function in their interpretations of the Old Testament Song of Songs. By highlighting the ways in which different "Solomons" are used to constrain and interpret the Song of Songs, I hope to unveil some of the social and cultural conflicts lurking behind these exegetical projects. "Solomon" as author of the Song of Songs is used not only to

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some point between the compilation of the Mishnah and Tosefta and the writing of the Song of Songs Rabbah (between the third and sixth centuries), the ascription of Solomon became a significant determinant in Jewish interpretation of the text. The earliest rabbinic text linking Solomon with the "impure" (i.e., sacrosanct) nature of the Song of Songs appears to be Tosefta *Yadayim* 2.13-14. See Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 163-196; D. Barthélemy, "Comment le Cantique des Cantiques est-il devenu Canonique?" in A. Caquot, S. Légasse, and M. Tardieu, eds., *Mélanges bibliques et orientaux en l'honneur de M. Mathias Delcor* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985), 13-22; Roland E. Murphy, "History of Exegesis as a Hermeneutical Tool: The Song of Songs," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 16 (1986): 87-91, esp. 88-9; and on contact between Jewish and Christian exegesis, E.E. Urbach, "The Homiletical Interpretations of the Sages and the Expositions of Origen on Canticles, and the Jewish Christian Disputation," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22 (1971): 247-275 (originally in Hebrew in *Tarbiz* 30 [1961]: 148-170).

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, "What is an Author," 109; He pays special attention to the shift in the "seventeenth or eighteenth century" in the significance of the authors of fiction and poetry.

<sup>14</sup> In his later works Foucault found that he could not adequately explore the "modern" conceptions of power and sexuality without delving into the murky past of classical antiquity and early Christianity: see Elizabeth A. Clark, "Foucault, the Fathers, and Sex," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56 (1988): 619-641, esp. 619; Averil Cameron, "Redrawing the Map: Early Christian Territory after Foucault," *Journal of Roman Studies* 76 (1986): 266-271, esp. 270: "[T]he texts of early Christianity offer a particularly rich material for anyone interested in the place of words, or discourse, in history."

<sup>15</sup> Foucault, "What is an Author," 111, emphasis mine. Unfortunately, Foucault does not specify where (or even if) in *De viris illustribus* (referred to on 110) these four "modalities" may be found. Relevant passages (mostly discarding texts because of inconsistency of authorial "style") are found in *De viris illustribus* 1 (Simon Peter), 4 (Jude), 5 (Paul), 15 (Clement of Rome), 25 (Theophilus), and 58 (Minucius Felix) (*Patrologia Latina* 23.639A, 638C; 647C; 663C; 678B; 766A). Possibly Foucault is extrapolating reasons for which Jerome declares certain texts "apocryphal," or is bringing in points from elsewhere in Jerome's (massive) corpus of writings.

<sup>16</sup> I am preceded in this endeavor by the work of Mark Vessey, "The Forging of Orthodoxy in Latin Christian Literature: A Case Study," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4 (1994): 495-513, on the "author function" in the inception of an authoritative patristic corpus. See especially his footnotes on the background of Foucault's own "patristic" support for his authorial "modalities": 507, notes 30 and 31.

produce authoritative *meaning* from the biblical text, but also to erect exegetical boundaries around the idealized Christian reader. In the third- and fourth-century worlds of early Christian self-definition, hermeneutical strategies not only exercise control over authoritative meaning—production of “truth” from Scriptural exegesis—but also delimit the very audience defined as “Christian.”<sup>17</sup> As the criteria of authority and power in Christianity shift, so too do the criteria for knowledge and power evident in the hermeneutical endeavors of experts. So, too, does the character and function of “Solomon,” the author of that prurient, “salacious” song.

### *Origen and Authorial Construction: Librorum Solomonis*

Origen, the first significant Christian commentator on the Song of Songs,<sup>18</sup> textually links the author Solomon with a prefatory discussion on “love itself”: “It seems necessary to me, before we come to the matters contained in this little book, to say a few things first about love itself (*amor ipso*), which is the principle theme of this writing, and after that on the order of the books of Solomon (*librorum Solomonis*), in which this book holds third place.”<sup>19</sup> “Love itself” was, of course, one of the great themes of “pagan” philosophy. We cannot but hear references to Plato’s *Symposium* or *Phaedrus* in Origen’s prologue: “Among the Greeks, indeed, many learned men, desiring to pursue the search for truth, produced a great variety of writings on the nature of love in the genre of dialogues.”<sup>20</sup> Yet how does the “order of the books of Solomon” pertain to the failed attempts of the “learned Greeks” on matters

<sup>17</sup> See Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983): “One may call ‘power strategy’ the totality of the means put into operation to implement power effectively or maintain it” (225, trans. Leslie Sawyer).

<sup>18</sup> Fragments of a commentary by Hippolytus (roughly Origen’s contemporary) survive, but only enough to establish a vague typological method: see Pope, *Song of Songs*, 114.

<sup>19</sup> Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, P.1.8. Text in Luc Brèsard, Henri Crouzel, and Marcel Borret, eds., *Commentaire sur le Cantique des Cantiques* (Paris: du Cerf, 1991; Sources Chrétiennes [henceforth SC] 375-6), here SC 375, 86. Translations follow R.P. Lawson, *Origen: The Song of Songs. Commentary and Homilies* (New York and Ramsey, NJ: Newman Press, 1956; Ancient Christian Writers 26) although at points altered for clarity. I shall primarily focus on Origen’s *Commentary* rather than his two extant homilies. Both texts survive chiefly in Latin translations from the fourth century (by Rufinus and Jerome, respectively), with some Greek fragments in the *Philocalia* and Greek exegetical *catenae*: see *Clavis Patrum Graecorum* (1983) I.156-157 (§1432-1434). The homilies repeat closely the content of the *Commentary*; Pierre Nautin’s chronology places the *Homilies* first (ca. 240), followed a few years later by the *Commentary* written in Caesarea (245-6): *Origène. Sa vie et son oeuvre* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1977), 411; O. Rousseau, however, believes the *Homilies* to be subsequent to and dependent upon the *Commentary*: O. Rousseau, ed., *Homélies sur le Cantique des Cantiques* (Paris: du Cerf, 1955; SC 37bis), “Note préliminaire,” 9.

<sup>20</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, P.2.1 (SC 375, 90). See note 23, *infra*.

of love? I suggest that Origen's particular use of the "author function" of the Song of Songs combines the "fear of proliferation of meaning" with one of the crucial social discourses of third-century Christianity: the discursive differentiation of the Christian subject from an intellectual pagan "other." Origen's "philosophical" Solomon does indeed serve to delimit the text and exclude all "carnal" meanings of love in this erotic poem: Foucault states that the "author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning."<sup>21</sup> But Foucault also reminds us that cultural discourses are interrelated: "the author function is linked to the juridical and institutional system that encompasses, determines, and articulates the universe of discourses."<sup>22</sup> The pages of Christian literature from the second and third centuries (and, indeed, even beyond legalization) teem with efforts to define more sharply the "us" that is Christianity by disparaging and excluding various groups which are "them." Scriptural interpretation was one of the battlefields on which this war of self-articulation was waged. In his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Origen deploys the author function not only in an effort to delimit certain readings (those "carnal" understandings antithetical to the "spirit" of the text) but to delimit a uniquely Christian space outside of which lurk those "others" who attempt to define love, namely, those misguided "Greeks." This exclusion becomes critical at moments when Origen's Scriptural commentary drifts too close to the ideas of "pagan" philosophical thought: a semblance of sameness necessitates a reiteration of difference.<sup>23</sup> To this end he constructs a philosophical *oeuvre* ascribed to Solomon, "similar" to Platonic philosophy but enunciated as a boundary of difference: this *oeuvre* defines a Scriptural space prophylactically sealed off from unwanted readings, and from unwanted readers. Foucault describes the location of a work within an *oeuvre* as an integral facet of the deployment of the "author's name":

[T]he fact that several texts have been placed under the same name indicates that there has been established among them a relationship of homogeneity, filiation, authentication of some texts by the use of others, reciprocal explication, or concomitant utilization. The author's name serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Foucault, "What is an Author," 118.

<sup>22</sup> Foucault, "What is an Author," 113.

<sup>23</sup> Many of the ideas in Origen's *Commentary* and *Homilies*, especially concerning the "love" of the individual soul for the Divine Being, resonate with Platonic ideals of love: see *Symposium*, 183D (*LCL* 3, 116); 204B (*LCL* 3, 182); and 211C-E (*JCL* 3, 204-206), where Diotima describes man ascending in degrees of love, "as on the rungs of a ladder . . . so that in the end he comes to know the perfection of beauty." Text edited by W.R.M. Lamb in the Loeb Classical Library (1975). This *teleutōn ho esti kalon* is further described as "divine beauty" (*theion kalon*) which is "not infected with the flesh and color of humanity." Compare Origen, *Commentary*, P.2.15-19 (SC 375, 102-104) and 3.8.13-18 (SC 376, 574-578); and *Homilies*, II.8 (SC 37bis, 132-4).

<sup>24</sup> Foucault, "What is an Author," 107.

The framework of an author's *oeuvre* allows for a more nuanced use of the author function. A single text located within a more broadly defined body of works—Foucault cites such varied examples as Aristotle, Rimbaud, Shakespeare, Balzac, and Hermes Trismegistus—becomes “a speech that must be received in a certain mode and that, in a given culture, must receive a certain status.”<sup>25</sup> The “certain status” is the authority of Scripture, which will transform the erotic love of the Song of Songs into a “certain mode” of Origenist divine love, entirely distinct (despite conceptual “similarities”) from the love of the divine described by the Greeks.

The third-century Christian allegorist begins his commentary on the Song of Songs by cautioning his reader about the dangers of approaching the song “according to the flesh,”<sup>26</sup> thus calling immediate attention to a potentially transgressive “proliferation of meanings.” This is not a song about sexual love, but rather about the love of “the Church in relation to Christ, or the soul in her union with the Word of God.”<sup>27</sup> For Origen, interpretation of Scripture, acquisition of knowledge, and the love of Christ together formed the complex practice of becoming a perfect Christian. “Love of God” means attempting to know him; attempting to know him means reading (and interpreting) Scripture.<sup>28</sup> This interrelation of “love” and “text” (both activated by reading) informs Origen’s task of delimiting the “meaning of the text” (love) by a careful construction of its author and his works (Solomon and his three-book *oeuvre*).<sup>29</sup>

For Origen love is a vital but dangerous subject: vital, because the “force of love is nothing else than that which leads the soul from earth to the elevated heights of heaven”; dangerous, since “carnal men (*carnales homines*) have drawn these arts [of love] into the vicious longings and the secrets of guilty love.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, a text treating love must be carefully bounded so that its function remains spiritual and salvific, and does not sink into “guilty” carnality. Such a bounding entails the exclusion not only of certain readings but of certain readers, too: Origen declares that “even among the Greeks, who

<sup>25</sup> Foucault, “What is an Author,” 105-107.

<sup>26</sup> “*secundum carnem*”: Origen, *Commentary*, P.1.6 (SC 375, 84).

<sup>27</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, 1.1.2 (SC 375, 176).

<sup>28</sup> See Henri Crouzel, *Origen* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 73: “In Origen’s exegesis the spiritual and the speculative interact”; J.W. Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third Century Church* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 205: “This access [to the Word] comes, of course, through study of the Bible.”

<sup>29</sup> For a provocative literary critical exploration of the relation in Origen between “eros” and text, see Patricia Cox Miller, “‘Pleasure of the Text, Text of Pleasure’: Eros and Language in Origen’s *Commentary on the Song of Songs*,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 54 (1986): 241-253: “For Origen, as for Barthes, the text is an erotic body where word and reader, Bridegroom and Bride, are joined” (251). This “erotic body” remains for Origen, however, an entirely “spiritual” body.

<sup>30</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, P.2.1 (SC 375, 90).

seem wise and learned, there have nonetheless been some who did not understand what was said about this [the nature of love] as it was written.”<sup>31</sup> Contrasted with these “learned Greeks”<sup>32</sup> are the various Scriptural authors: the “words of Moses,” gospel “written by John,” the wisdom of “Paul,” “Ezekiel,” and others;<sup>33</sup> these allow Origen to conclude that Scripture “speaks of this love with which the blessed soul burns and is inflamed towards the Word of God.”<sup>34</sup> As mentioned above, “love” means knowledge of God’s Word, which signifies for Origen both the Word made flesh (Christ) and the Word made text (Scripture): knowledge of the latter leads to knowledge, and ultimately to “love,” of the former. Origen’s first move in his prologue is to delimit and control the potentially transgressive meanings of “love”: furthermore, this delimitation specifies the correct reader (the pure Christian) and excludes the perpetrators of other readings (here, “the learned Greeks”). This control of the meaning of “love,” however, is fully accomplished by Origen’s discussion of Solomon and his three-volume *oeuvre*.

According to Origen the church has received three books “written by Solomon” and these are found in a specific order related to the “three general disciplines by which one comes to knowledge of matters [*ad rerum scientiam*].”<sup>35</sup> In Proverbs Solomon “taught the moral science”; in Ecclesiastes “he covered the science known as natural”; and finally “the inspective science he passed on in this little book that we have now at hand, that is, the Song of Songs.”<sup>36</sup> Origen concedes that these three “disciplines” are known to the Greeks as “ethics, physics, and epoptics,”<sup>37</sup>—sometimes along with a fourth discipline,

<sup>31</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, P.2.2 (SC 375, 90).

<sup>32</sup> We know that Origen was well-read in “pagan” Greek literature, including Plato’s *Symposium*, likely referred to in this passages on “Greek love”: see SC 375, 90, note 2.

<sup>33</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, P.2.4-48 (SC 375, 92-124): this section is a rather detailed “anthropology,” in which the various “loves” of mankind are distilled, through Scriptural reference and Origen’s own analogies, to the perfect “love of God,” on which Origen in turn reflects. The most important point, for this discussion, is the rapidity with which Origen dismisses “the learned Greeks” and the amount of time he spends on his Scriptural interpretation of love.

<sup>34</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, P.2.46 (SC 375, 122).

<sup>35</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, P.3.1 (SC 375, 128). It is unclear what Origen thought of the Book of Wisdom, commonly attributed to Solomon: in the midst of his Scriptural litany of love he refers to “the book that is called the Wisdom of Solomon” (P.2.22; SC 375, 108). For discussion of this issue, see Lawson, *Origen: The Song of Songs*, 317-18 (note 65). For the origins and development of the idea of Solomon’s three-part *oeuvre*, see Marguerite Harl, “Les trois livres de Salomon et les trois parties de la philosophie dans les Prologues des Commentaires sur le Cantique des Cantiques (d’Origène aux Chaînes exégétiques grecques),” in Jürgen Dummer, ed., *Text und Textkritik: Eine Aufsatzsammlung* (Berlin: Berliner-Akademie Verlag, 1987) (= *Texte und Untersuchungen* 133), 249-269. Harl believes that “without a doubt this idea has its roots in the Jewish biblical tradition” (249).

<sup>36</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, P.3.6-7 (SC 375, 132).

<sup>37</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, P.3.1 (SC 375, 128). I translate here the variant manuscript reading of Brésard-Crouzel, “epoptic,” over Baehrens’ “enoptic”: see *Commentary*, “Notes Complémentaires,” note 4 (SC 376, 755). Either would refer to some brand of Middle Platonic mysticism. On



logics—but announces that “the sages of the Greeks borrowed these ideas from Solomon, who had learned them from the Spirit of God at an age and time long before their own. . . . Solomon discovered and taught these things by the wisdom that he received from God.”<sup>38</sup> The God-given wisdom of Solomon is supported with a passage from 1 Kings (LXX 3 Kings): “God gave understanding to Solomon and exceeding wisdom, and a heart as large as the sands on the shore. And wisdom was multiplied in him above all the sons of men that were of old, and above all the sages of Egypt” (4.29-30). Thus the author constructed by Origen for the Song of Songs is not the overly “carnal” *philogunaios* Solomon who had a harem of “seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines” (1 Kings 11.3),<sup>39</sup> on the contrary, he is the paragon of a wisdom that preceded the Greeks not only chronologically but so substantively that Origen can call him “the master who first teaches men divine philosophy (*divinam philosophiam*).”<sup>40</sup> He laid out a philosophical course of instruction, leading the pupil first through the “moral science” (Proverbs) then on to “train his natural intelligence . . . [and to] recognize the ‘vanity of vanities’ that he must forsake” (Ecclesiastes), finally to “reach out for the things unseen and eternal which, with spiritual meaning, yes, but under certain secret metaphors of love, are taught in the Song of Songs.”<sup>41</sup> Here the resulting “Solomon,” along with his tripartite philosophical *oeuvre*, serves the interpretive functions that Foucault outlined: a potentially transgressive text is assigned an impeccable authority, the creator of the first “true philosophy,”<sup>42</sup> and this authority further contains the “fear of proliferation of meaning” by making the author’s *oeuvre* into a philosophical ladder that instructs in morals (Proverbs) and “nature” (Ecclesiastes), and must “characterize a certain mode of being,” that of “the things which must be contemplated and desired, and ‘which are not seen and are eternal.’”<sup>43</sup> “Solomon,” author of wisdom painted in definite philosophical colors by Origen (yet

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the substitution of “epoptics” for “logics” in Origen, see Harl, “Les trois livres de Salomon,” 252-3, especially notes 16 and 17 on the tradition of this substitution before and after Origen.

<sup>38</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, P.3.4 (SC 375, 130).

<sup>39</sup> See also Origen, *Commentary*, P.4.21 (SC 375, 162): “On this account, therefore, it is merely “the Song of Songs that is Solomon’s,” and not “the son of David’s,” or “the King of Israel’s,” nor any notion at all of a carnal name (*carnalis nominis*) mixed in to these things.”

<sup>40</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, P.3.14 (SC 375, 136).

<sup>41</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, P.3.14-15 (SC 375, 136-8). Marguerite Harl points out that “in order to obtain the parallel between the Solomonic trilogy and the tripartition of philosophy, Origen (or his Jewish model) used an incontestable point of departure and point of arrival: Proverbs indeed teaches ethics, the Song of Songs is indeed a song of mystical union. Only working backwards, through a distortion and the interpretation of the single word ‘vanity,’ could Ecclesiastes be assimilated to physics” (“Les Trois Livres de Salomon,” 253).

<sup>42</sup> “*verae philosophiae*”: Origen, *Commentary*, P.3.8 (SC 375, 132). For discussion of this term, see *Commentary*, “Notes complémentaires,” note 6 (SC 376, 756-7).

<sup>43</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, P.3.22 (SC 375, 142), referring to 2 Cor. 4.18.

clearly distinguished from “Greek wise men”), delimits the problematic and potentially carnal text of the Song, and directs its interpretation along the contemplative and spiritual lines that, for Origen, transformed Scriptural interpretation into an act of “divine love.” What’s more, this “Solomon,” as the chronologically prior disseminator of “God-given” wisdom,<sup>44</sup> excludes from the correct reading of his *libellus* those “borrowing” Greek sages who have also attempted to speak of the true nature of love but lacked access to the “philosophy . . . ascribed not to human skills but to the grace of God.”<sup>45</sup>

The particular “Solomon” established by Origen in the prologue frames the verse-by-verse interpretation of the Song, and throughout functions to constrain the meaning of the text and exclude specific categories of readers.<sup>46</sup> The mention in the Song of “Solomon’s curtains” (1.5) is the occasion for Origen to allegorize the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon’s court (1 Kings 10.1-10); through the use of Matt. 12.42, the conspicuous consumption of two wealthy monarchs is transformed into a quest for knowledge and truth.<sup>47</sup> Solomon’s “knowledge of the true God” is once more contrasted with those things that “remained doubtful and uncertain . . . for the gentile philosophers (*gentiles . . . philosophos*).”<sup>48</sup> Elsewhere in the commentary, the Queen of Sheba again opens the way for Origen to deemphasize the unfortunate carnality associated with Solomon in the Old Testament, and to reiterate his construction of the author of the Song of Songs as the spiritual philosopher-king: “It seems to me that she [the Queen] marveled rather at the ‘meats’ of his teaching and the ‘wine’ of the judgments which were uttered by him through the divine wisdom.”<sup>49</sup> Such luxury as described in the historical books of the Old Testament would not, without proper interpretation, sit well with the author Origen has depicted for the Song of Songs.

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<sup>44</sup> In early Christian literature (including other works of Origen himself) Moses is wielded against the Greeks as a chronologically prior source of divine wisdom: see Arthur Droge, *Homer or Moses?* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1989) *passim*, esp. 152-167 on Origen (treating mainly the *Contra Celsum*).

<sup>45</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, P.3.19 (SC 375, 140).

<sup>46</sup> Rufinus’ translation only goes through verse 2.15 of the Song of Songs (perhaps a third of the original Greek commentary). Considering that “Solomon” is mentioned five more times (3.7, 9, 11; 8.11, 12) in passages of the Song not extant in Origen’s exegesis, we may infer that he would have discussed “the author Solomon” at least at those points, as well.

<sup>47</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, 2.1.26-27 (SC 375, 276). Matt 12.42: “The Queen of the south will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.”

<sup>48</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, 2.1.27 (SC 375, 276).

<sup>49</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, 1.2.15 (SC 375, 200), referring to 1 Kings 10.4-5. It is possible that “divine wisdom” (*divinam sapientiam*) is meant to contrast with “worldly wisdom,” since “the queen” is also for Origen an allegory for the “ecclesia ex gentibus” (*Commentary*, 2.1.14 [SC 375, 268]).

Solomon's philosophical genius also produces the famous dictum "Know thyself."<sup>50</sup> Through a strained Greek translation Origen is able to assign to Solomon the Greek philosophical *bon mot* that depicts "self-knowledge" as Christian love of God:

Among other remarkable sentences this one is said to be from one of those Seven celebrated for their singular wisdom among the Greeks: "Learn who you are" or "Know thyself." In fact, however, Solomon, whom we have shown to have preceded all these in time, in wisdom, and in knowledge of matters in our preface, speaks this to the soul, as if to a woman in a menacing tone.<sup>51</sup>

Then follow pages of instruction on how the soul may "know itself"; principally, this means coming to "know the Trinity"<sup>52</sup> and so excludes those "celebrated" wise Greeks who are not Christian and can thus never fully "know themselves." Knowledge of the Trinity is of course achieved through the reading and interpretation of Scripture: text, love, and knowledge (and the mediating control of all three) again intersect in this depiction of Solomon as the prime author of Christian wisdom.

Origen also has occasion to manipulate a third aspect of Foucault's author function: the mutability and plasticity by which the author exhibits a "plurality of self."<sup>53</sup> Origen's understanding of Scripture as both the product of a series of authors (Moses, David, Solomon, Paul, etc.) and the "textual" incarnation of the Word of God<sup>54</sup> leads him at points in his commentary to subsume the historical figure of Solomon into the "sacred author" of the text, divine Wisdom itself. Often these two "simultaneous author-subjects"<sup>55</sup> are juxtaposed. In the prologuc, the historical Solomon is emphasized by placing the Song of Songs in a chronological line of Scriptural songs:

<sup>50</sup> Song 1.7 reads "Unless you know yourself, O fair among women . . ."; in Rufinus' Latin this is: "nisi cognoveris te"; in the Greek of the Septuagint (one of the texts Origen would have used) it reads: "*ean mē gnōs seautēn*"; the traditional Greek axiom is "*gnōthi seauton*" or, as in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, "*gignōske sauton*" (l. 305); on the expression's earliest uses in Greek cult (as at Delphi) and philosophy (as in Plato) see P. Courcelle, *Connais-toi Toi-Même de Socrate à Saint Bernard* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1974) 1.11-20. On Origen's relation to these earlier and subsequent uses see Courcelle, *Connais-toi*, 1.97-100.

<sup>51</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, 2.5.1-2 (SC 375, 354). The exegetical *catenae* attributed to Procopius preserve a probable summary of the original Greek commentary; this passage agrees closely with Rufinus' translation, although the *catena* moves quickly from Solomon's philosophical priority to the "ecclesiastical" interpretation of the verse (*Patrologia Graeca* 17, 256D-257C).

<sup>52</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, 2.5.2-22 (SC 375, 354-366).

<sup>53</sup> Foucault, "What is an Author," 112-113. We shall see below, in Gregory of Nyssa's *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, how this "plurality" functions historically to mark the disjunction of interpretive endeavors.

<sup>54</sup> Crouzel, *Origen*, 70: "Scripture is [for Origen] in a way an incarnation of the Word into the letter analogous to the other incarnation in the flesh."

<sup>55</sup> Foucault, "What is an Author," 113.

“this Song that Solomon sang” is the ultimate culmination of songs “sung of old by prophets or by angels.”<sup>56</sup> Inclusion in such a list, in which all of the singers are mortal, historical (although inspired) personages, underscores the historical reality of the wise philosopher Solomon. Yet, directly after including Solomon in this distinguished list of mortal musicians, Origen goes on to suggest that “Solomon is in many respects a type (*typum*) of Christ, first in that he is called ‘peaceable’ [Origen’s etymology of ‘Solomon’], and also because ‘the queen of the south came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon’ [Matt. 12.42].”<sup>57</sup> The visit of the “queen of the South” allows Origen to describe the “author” Solomon as encompassing “he who is greater than Solomon,” and who thus becomes “the true Solomon, the truly ‘peaceful one,’ our lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>58</sup> By allegorically expanding the function of the author, so that he is at the same time “Solomon” and “Solomon-type-of-Christ,” Origen can tighten up the link between the human author and the divine wisdom embedded in the text. On the one hand, this doubled Solomon provides a control on “proliferation of meaning.” In addition, however, this authorial “simultaneity” reflects the self-differential discourse tied into Origen’s hermeneutics: “Solomon-as-Christ” naturally inscribes “love” as the love of God, and even those pagans who have managed to “borrow” Solomon’s philosophical wisdom can do so only in an inferior way, as “worldly” and “secular”;<sup>59</sup> lacking the “divine” component that simultaneously functions as author of the text, they will again be excluded from access to true wisdom, true love, and true interpretive meaning. Over a century later, Gregory of Nyssa will latch onto this simultaneity, so tamely introduced by Origen, and explode it as a means of deconstructing Origen’s “Solomon,” in order to create his own author, and his own Scriptural truth and authority.

<sup>56</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, P.4.3 (SC 375, 146-148). The Song of Songs is seventh, after the songs of: Moses (Ex. 15.1), the people in Numbers (Num. 21.17-18), the children of Israel (Deut. 31.19), Deborah and Barak (Judg. 5.12), David (2 Sam. 22.1-13), and Asaph and his brothers (1 Chron. 16.8-9) (*Commentary*, P.4.5-12 [SC 375, 148-154]). The list is repeated in the *Homilies*, with the sixth being transferred from Asaph to Isaiah (Isa 5.1): Origen, *Homilies*, I.1 (SC 37bis, 66-68).

<sup>57</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, P.4.17 (SC 375, 158). Origen is still more explicit in his homilies: “She [the queen of the South] came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom not of that Solomon spoken of in the Old Testament, but of he who in the Gospel is ‘greater than Solomon’ [Matt. 12.42b]” (*Homilies*, I.6 [SC 37bis, 90-92]). Yet immediately following Origen returns to discussion of the “historical” Solomon, who “was rich indeed, and no one surpassed him in all wisdom” (*Homilies*, I.6 [SC 37bis, 92]).

<sup>58</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, 2.1.26-27 (SC 375, 276).

<sup>59</sup> See Origen, *Commentary*, 2.5.40 (SC 375, 376).

*Gregory of Nyssa and Authorial Deconstruction: “The Text Philosophizes”*<sup>60</sup>

Like Origen, Gregory begins his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* with warnings against the “carnal” reading of the Song. His warnings on eliciting spiritual truth by correct methods of interpretation ring with the language of containment and purity: “By appropriate contemplation, the philosophy hidden in the phrases becomes manifest once the bare meaning in the writing has been purified into undefiled understandings.”<sup>61</sup> Yet while for Origen the interpretation of the Song of Songs is to be undertaken only by those who have *already* been “cleansed” (*defaecatus*) and “purified in all actions and habits,”<sup>62</sup> Gregory finds time and again that he must address those ranks of “more fleshly” (*sarkōdesterois*) Christians who are unprepared to uncover the “hidden wisdom” of the Song.<sup>63</sup> Constant reminders abound throughout the *Commentary* to the reader to avoid the “carnal” readings of the text, to seek the “spiritual” truth behind the letter, and to read the text “as if the body were dead”; such warning would be superfluous if Gregory did not imagine at least a portion of his audience as prone to such readings and in need of superior guidance. We could even read the extended defense of allegorical reading that forms the core of Gregory’s prologue not only as a response to “Antiochene” detractors, but also as a means of warding off these “fleshly” adherents of the letter.<sup>64</sup> While Origen had been eager to exclude “Greek”

<sup>60</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, *oratio* 1 (23, 12-16): “The text (*logos*) laid before us exhorts the same things, not merely offering forth counsel concerning this [i.e., love] but through secrets it philosophizes in its thoughts, offering some images of the pleasures of life as a preparation for its teachings.” Text in Werner Jaeger, ed., *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, volume 6 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1952-61). Numbers in parentheses correspond to page and line numbers in the critical text. Translations are generally my own, although the Casimir McCambley (*Commentary on the Song of Songs. Saint Gregory of Nyssa* [Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1987]) translation has at times been consulted. The *Commentary* seems originally to have been a series of homilies delivered by Gregory, subsequently edited with recommendations from some “associates” in his church (*Commentary*, Prologue [13, 8-16]).

<sup>61</sup> Gregory, *Commentary*, Prologue (3, 4-4, 2).

<sup>62</sup> Origen, *Commentary*, P.3.16 (SC 375, 138).

<sup>63</sup> Gregory, *Commentary*, Prologue (4, 7-10). The homilies that comprise the *Commentary* are dedicated and (apparently) compiled for Gregory’s chaste friend Olympias: Gregory is nonetheless adamant that Olympias has little need of such interpretation, since her “soul’s eye, purified from every passionate and defiling thought, looks unhindered through these divine words at the pure grace of God” (Prologue: 4, 3-6).

<sup>64</sup> “Carnal” warnings: *Commentary*, *oratio* 1 (15, 4-12; 25, 2-6); *oratio* 2 (45, 11-15); *oratio* 9 (262, 6-14). Defense of allegory: Prologue (4, 10-12, 19). For a well-structured, traditional explanation of the *apologia* for allegory see Ronald E. Heine, “Gregory of Nyssa’s Apology for Allegory,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 38 (1984): 360-70. It might be argued that the original lay audience of Gregory’s homilies might have necessitated more warnings than the readers of Origen’s lofty *Commentary*. Yet what exhortations to “listen spiritually” do survive in Origen’s homilies lack the recurring panic found in Gregory’s dire warnings (compare Origen, *Homilies*, II.1 [SC 37bis, 104]).

readings and readers from his interpretation of the Song of Songs, Gregory's targets of discursive exclusion are the "impure" Christians who have not learned to give up "fleshly" thoughts and desires. Origen had assumed that any decent Christian, following Solomon's philosophical ladder of instruction, would arrive in due course to read the Song of Songs and glean its mystical wisdom. Gregory is far more cautious: at every turn he rattles his ascetic saber at those "too fleshly" Christians who seek wisdom of which they are far from capable. We saw the "extra-textual" social discourses implicated in Origen's hermeneutical strategy and his deployment of the author function, namely, the self-differentiation of "Christian wisdom" from "Greek wisdom" despite (or, perhaps, because of) conceptual similarities. By the time Gregory sends his *Commentary* off to Olympias,<sup>65</sup> the nature of Christian self-definition has shifted considerably. In the intervening years between Origen and Gregory, Christianity has become the official religion of the Roman Empire and the Greek Christian East has witnessed the rise of a super-eminent model of holiness: the ascetic. The boundaries to be maintained—and the concepts and persons to be excluded—have shifted along these discursive lines.<sup>66</sup> As a consequence, the "Solomon" we find described and utilized in Gregory's *Commentary* has been radically altered from the "Solomon" constructed by Origen.<sup>67</sup>

There are three places where Gregory discusses "Solomon," the author of the Song of Songs, in some detail; all three are occasioned by the mention of the name "Solomon" in the Song itself: in the first *oratio*, in regard to the first verse of the Song ("The song of songs which is Solomon's"); in the second *oratio*, concerning "the curtains of Solomon" (1.5); and in the seventh *oratio*, in relation to the verses "King Solomon made himself a litter" (3.9) and "Go forth daughters of Zion and behold King Solomon" (3.11).<sup>68</sup> In all three instances, Gregory exploits the occurrence of Solomon's name

<sup>65</sup> According to J.B. Cahill, "The Date and Setting of Gregory of Nyssa's *Commentary* on the Song of Songs," *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 32 (1981): 447-460, Gregory probably compiled the commentary after 391 (Olympias' return from exile to Constantinople) and before 394 (his last public appearance) (448-49).

<sup>66</sup> On this social-historical shift between Origen and the commentators of the fourth and fifth centuries, see Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Uses of the Song of Songs: Origen and the Later Latin Fathers," in *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays in Late Ancient Christianity* (Lewiston/Queenston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986; *Studies in Women and Religion* 20), 395-6. While Clark focuses on the Latin successors of Origen's exegesis, many of her observations hold true for the Greek East, as well.

<sup>67</sup> Gregory early on admits his indebtedness to Origen's *Commentary*, but also attempts to distinguish his efforts from Origen's: "Although Origen, with a love of toil (*philoponōs*), zealously applied himself concerning this book, we too desired to apply our own toil (*ton ponon hēmōn*) to Scripture" (Prologue: 13, 3-5).

<sup>68</sup> Gregory chooses very deliberately *not* to discuss Solomon at his discussion of 3.7, where the Song mentions "Solomon's bed" (*oratio* 6 [190, 6-17]): this will be further discussed below. The *Commentary* ends at Song 6.9, with two references to Solomon (8.11, 12) left uninterpreted.

within the "Song of Solomon" in order to reconstruct an originator of the text far different from Origen's ancient philosophical master. From the very first mention of Solomon in the first *oratio*, Gregory chooses to dismiss the "historical" king of Israel as the author of this preeminently virtuous song in favor of "another Solomon":

The one who establishes this law is Solomon. . . . Do you think that I mean the same Solomon from Bathsheba, who offered up on the mountain the thousand-fold sacrifice (1 Kings 11.6-8), who followed the Sidonian's counsel into sin (1 Kings 11.1-2)? No, rather another Solomon is signified through this: this one too is born from the seed of David according to the flesh, his name is Peace, he is the true king of Israel and builder of God's temple. He comprehends the knowledge of all things, his wisdom is infinite and his very essence is wisdom, truth, and every exalted, divine name and thought. He used *that* Solomon as an instrument and speaks to us through his voice first in Proverbs and then in Ecclesiastes. After these two books he directs us in the philosophy laid forth in the Song of Songs and in an orderly way he shows the ascent to perfection.<sup>69</sup>

The terms are familiar from Origen's interpretation: we have divine wisdom, the historical Solomon, Solomon-type-of-Christ, and the path to "perfection." For Origen, however these elements converged in a particular way to produce a particular author: the philosophical master Solomon, graced with God's wisdom and simultaneously acting as the "typus" of Christ, chronologically and christologically superior to all subsequent Greek copies. Gregory shifts these elements around, creating a new emphasis and a new author: here the unique author is Christ, ultimately "wise" and pure, who merely used Solomon (whose mortal wisdom must pale next to "infinite wisdom") as his "instrument." Origen was apparently content to allegorize the stories of the "carnal" Solomon into philosophical adventures, such as the visit of the Queen of Sheba; his main use of the author function, after all, was the valuation of "Christian" wisdom over "Greek" wisdom. Gregory's emphasis, however, is on purity and virtue: the mortal Solomon, notorious for his idolatry and adultery in the books of Kings, is irredeemable in this sense. So Gregory chooses to inflate the "plurality of selves" found in Origen's Solomon, to the point that the sinful Solomon fades away entirely and only the eternally wise author "Solomon-Christ" remains. It is *this* Solomon who has set forth a philosophical ladder in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and, ultimately, the Song of Songs, a ladder leading not to perfect "wisdom," which might be appropriate to the earthly philosopher Solomon (as in Origen's commentary), but rather to perfect "purity."<sup>70</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Gregory, *Commentary*, *oratio* 1 (16, 14-17, 11).

<sup>70</sup> See C.W. MacLeod, "Allegory and Mysticism in Origen and St Gregory of Nyssa," *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 22 (1971): 362-379: "Gregory's notion of spirituality . . . is a progress

Even Gregory's description of the Solomonic *oeuvre*, certainly relying on Origen's example, shifts the locus of instruction from "Solomon's wisdom" to "Christ's virtue."<sup>71</sup> Marguerite Harl's essay on interpretation of Solomon's *oeuvre* points out that "Gregory deliberately avoids the three technical terms of the parts of philosophy."<sup>72</sup> While Harl attributes this to "Gregory's aesthetic taste," preferring even obscure Greek words from the Septuagint to "scholarly and pedantic" jargon, we may also see Gregory's disregard for "classical" philosophical parallels as a shift in the nature and function of authorship and authority in his *Commentary*. For Origen it was necessary to broach classical philosophical training, so that he could then demonstrate its reliance on Solomon's teaching (*post hoc ergo propter hoc*) as well as its concomitant deficiencies. A war of wisdom is not Gregory's task, and so he prefers to place the agency of instruction on the pure shoulders of Christ himself. The entire three-step ladder of virtue (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs) is recast solely in terms of the Song of Songs, the "mystery of mysteries" for which the other two act as rehearsal and preparation. Marital language infiltrates Gregory's explanation of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, and he even describes the cast of Proverbs' characters in terms of their eventual realization in the Song: "The 'son' in Proverbs is named [in the Song of Songs] a 'bride,' and 'Wisdom' is changed into the role of a bridegroom so that the man (*anthrōpos*) might be espoused to God by becoming a pure virgin instead of a bridegroom."<sup>73</sup> The structure of the tripartite philosophy is thus deemphasized (or even ignored) by placing special emphasis on the Song of Songs; the carefully constructed author of this trilogy in turn dissolves back into the divine originator of Scripture. Just as the Song and its author are disjoined from all other "human philosophy," with which it was juxtaposed by Origen, so it is also disjoined from other "human Scripture." We recall how the ascent of Old Testament songs, culminating in the Song of Songs, served for Origen to locate Solomon as the ultimately wise *human* (and divinely inspired) Scriptural author. Gregory alludes to this same litany in

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not so much in knowledge (*gnōsis*) as in virtue (*aretē*)" (371). Compare Origen, *Commentary*, P.3.20 (SC 375, 140-2): "Nothing is proper to he who studies the divine philosophy but that he should be always moving forward, not from place to place but from knowledge (*scientiam*) of lower things to knowledge of higher things"; and Gregory, *Commentary*, *oratio* 1 (24, 8-9): "Let each person go up to that place, through dispassion (*apatheias*) into paradise and become through purity (*katharotēlos*) similar to God." Gregory's here employs his typical language of ascetical ascent and triumph: see Jean Daniélou, *Platonisme et Théologie Mystique: Doctrine Spirituelle de Saint Grégoire de Nysse* (Aubier: Éditions Montaigne, 1944), 92-103.

<sup>71</sup> *aretē*: Gregory, *Commentary*, *oratio* 1 (18, 6).

<sup>72</sup> Harl, "Les Trois livres de Salomon," 259.

<sup>73</sup> Gregory, *Commentary*, *oratio* 1 (23, 1-4). On the ascetic significance of this feminized "man"—"virgin" see Verna E.F. Harrison, "A Gender Reversal in Gregory of Nyssa's *First Homily on the Song of Songs*," *Studia Patristica* 27 (1993): 34-38.



the same exegetical context (explaining why it is called the “song of songs”), yet arrives at a diametrically opposed conclusion as to the Song’s authorship:

While there are many songs through the divinely-inspired teaching, through which we are taught the great concepts about God by great David and Isaiah and Moses and many others, we learn from this title that as much as the songs of the holy ones are set apart from the wisdom of profane songs, so much does the mystery in this Song of Songs surpass the songs of the holy ones.<sup>74</sup>

Here the location of the Song of Songs at the summit of all other Scriptural songs serves precisely to separate it from those other songs (and their “mortal” authors who are more laudable than the historical Solomon) and transform it into a purely divine text, with its true author being that “other” Solomon.

So by the time Gregory begins his “interpretation of the divine words,”<sup>75</sup> he has significantly defused the historical “author” Solomon, to the extent that he can comment in this way on the first verse of the Song:

It is not accidental, I think, that this book is ascribed to Solomon. This serves as an indication to readers to expect something great and divine in its content. For the marvel of his wisdom is unsurpassed among all who hear of his reputation. On account of this, the mention of his name at the outset raises the reader’s expectation to hope for something great and worthy of such glory in this book.<sup>76</sup>

The function of Solomon’s name, so crucial for Origen that it formed the center of the detailed prologue to his own *Commentary*, is here reduced to “an indication” and “a mention,” intended to catch the reader’s eye and make him “expect something great.” It is no longer, it seems, an indication of who actually *wrote* the Song of Songs, and why this fact is significant in its interpretation: Origen’s use of the author function has been entirely undermined and reversed by Gregory. Gregory next presents an analogy that permits him to eradicate utterly the signifier (Solomon) in favor of the more laudable signified (God):

In the art of painting, raw material, when filled in with different colors, becomes an image of the subject. However, the person looking at the image created by the skillful use of colors does not dwell on the colors smeared onto the tablet; he looks instead only at the form (*eidos*) the artist has shown in these colors. Thus it is with this Scripture: we should not look at the raw material of the colors in the words, rather we should consider that image of the king expressed by them in purified concepts.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Gregory, *Commentary*, *oratio* 1 (26, 16-27, 4).

<sup>75</sup> Gregory, *Commentary*, *oratio* 1 (27, 18-19): this comes about halfway through the first *oratio*, the preceding pages having apparently been prefatory.

<sup>76</sup> Gregory, *Commentary*, *oratio* 1 (27, 20-28, 7).

<sup>77</sup> Gregory, *Commentary*, *oratio* 1 (28, 7-17). It is difficult to disregard the Platonizing significance

"Solomon," as he appears in the first verse of the Song of Songs, dwindles in significance to an "image of the King," that is, a type of Christ. The philosophical author so carefully constructed by Origen has been defused, and the author-function just as carefully reassigned by Gregory.

Jaeger's edition of the *Commentary* runs almost 500 pages, in fifteen *orationes* and a prologue, yet the name "Solomon" appears only 20 times.<sup>78</sup> In fact, Gregory only mentions Solomon in the course of the *Commentary* as much as he has to: that is, where Solomon is specifically named in the Song.<sup>79</sup> At these points, Gregory dismisses the historical libertine Solomon in favor of "that other Solomon," the ultimately pure Christ. This transmuted author function is deployed in passages that contrast sinful ("fleshly") readings and "pure" (allegorical/ascetical)<sup>80</sup> interpretations of the texts at hand. For instance, the "black tents of Kedar" and "the curtains of Solomon" (1.5) are allegorized into the respectively sinful and purified soul: "If you had once been the 'tents of Kedar' because the ruler of the power of darkness dwelled in you (the word 'Kedar' signifies darkness), you will become the 'curtains of Solomon,' that is, you will become the king's temple with King Solomon dwelling in you." And later in the same section: "If anyone is a 'tent of Kedar,' he becomes a dwelling of light of the true Solomon, that is, the king of peace dwelling in him."<sup>81</sup> There is no discussion of the historical Solomon or his historical "tents," which are quickly allegorized away with the "enigmas of the Law."<sup>82</sup> Lest we consider such a dismissal of the historical figures a necessary by-product of allegorical method, we can turn back to Origen. For both exegetes the distinction between "blackness" and "beauty" reflects states of psychic purity; yet this was also the occasion for Origen to discuss the philosophical nature of Solomon's dealings with the Queen of Sheba, and to extol at length the wisdom and knowledge of the historical Solomon. It was at this same point that Origen introduced Solomon as the true inven-

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of the *eidōs*: such free-wheeling use of Platonism again underscores the fact that Gregory's conflict and focus of authority are not the same as Origen's.

<sup>78</sup> This number comes from the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*; McCambley's translation is misleading, since he often inserts "Solomon" as the subject of sentences on the Song's composition where no specific subject is attached to the verb.

<sup>79</sup> Gregory attributes authorial agency to Solomon on only one other occasion in the entire *Commentary*: On the "sweet odor" of the bride (4.10), he describes how the "symbolic fragrance" of asceticism has surpassed the aroma of Old Testament "scents of the Law," i.e., "animal sacrifice" and incense. Gregory here broaches the familiar trope of the "divine sense (*hē theia aisthēsis*), as Solomon calls it" (*oratio* 9 [267, 18-268, 15]). However, the contrast between asceticism and Old Testament sacrifice here precludes the human Solomon "who offered up on the mountain the thousand-fold sacrifice," which Gregory has already derided (*oratio* 1 [16, 19-20]).

<sup>80</sup> For a discussion of the conceptual links between allegorical exegesis and ascetic "philosophy" in Gregory see Verna E.F. Harrison, "Allegory and Asceticism in Gregory of Nyssa," *Semeia* 57 (1992): 113-130.

<sup>81</sup> Gregory, *Commentary*, *oratio* 2 (47, 13-48, 1; 49, 18-50, 1).

<sup>82</sup> Gregory, *Commentary*, *oratio* 2 (45, 4).

tor of the Greek dictum "know thyself": Gregory does not even blink at this chance to reassign that famous kernel of wisdom. Instead, he moves into a highly Platonic discussion of true "knowledge," which transcends matter and spirit.<sup>83</sup> Solomon is dismissed even more quickly in the sixth *oratio*, at the mention of "Solomon's bed." The Scriptures, Gregory reminds us, say nothing of Solomon's bed; perhaps it *might* be possible to learn about it from other "bodily" (*sōmatikōs*) details of Solomon's history, but it would be better, all things considered, simply to "move our consideration from the material meaning to spiritual interpretation."<sup>84</sup> We need only imagine what unascetical tidbits from Solomon's life with a thousand wives and concubines Gregory feels he would have to discuss were he to delve into Solomon's historical "bed."

In the beginning of the seventh *oratio*, in his exegesis of "Solomon's litter" (3.9), Gregory concentrates his efforts to erase the historical Solomon as author, and replace him with the divine author, Christ. All of the laudable deeds that Origen had emphasized in order to improve Solomon's questionable image and re-construct him as the *primus philosophus*, are here divested of all possible historical significance and reoriented in the direction of the Song's "true" author. This redirection also underscores the new boundaries Gregory sets around the meaning of the text, outside of which lie no longer "the Greeks," those catch-all outsiders of the third century, but "the impure." Gregory begins an idea taken almost verbatim from Origen, although he goes on to alter its significance:

In many ways King Solomon is taken as the pattern of the true King; I say that many things recounted in holy Scripture about him refer to something better. For he is called "peaceful"; he built a temple and had wisdom without measure; he ruled over Israel, judged the people in righteousness, and he comes from the seed of David; even the Queen of Ethiopia resorted to him. All these and similar things are said about him symbolically (*tupikōs*), predicting the power of the Gospel.<sup>85</sup>

Solomon is not the philosophical originator of the "something better" that sets Christians apart from outsiders: he is a symbol of the "true king," and his significance is "typical" rather than historical.<sup>86</sup> Gregory does not deny

<sup>83</sup> Gregory, *Commentary*, *oratio* 2 (63, 9-69, 20). According to Daniélou, Gregory's commentary on this passage inscribes "a central theme of Neo-platonism," especially reminiscent of Plotinus (*Platonisme et Théologie*, 41-2). Yet it conspicuously lacks the attempt at self-differentiation from these sources that characterizes Origen's Platonizing exegeses.

<sup>84</sup> Gregory, *Commentary*, *oratio* 6 (190, 6-18).

<sup>85</sup> Gregory, *Commentary*, *oratio* 7 (201, 3-11).

<sup>86</sup> Gregory's roughly contemporary work, *The Life of Moses*, similarly tends to disregard the historical reality of the Old Testament hero Moses in favor of his "symbolic" significance as the ascetic soul. See *Life of Moses*, 1.14-15, 77; 2.5, 50, 153 (text in Jean Daniélou, ed., *Vie de Moïse* [Paris: du Cerf, 1955] SC 1bis, 5-6; 30; 33; 45; 77) for places where "Moses" vanishes

the "historical truth" that Solomon's wisdom "goes beyond the bounds of human wisdom," but points out that this merely sets him apart from the humans who came "before him and after him":<sup>87</sup> "However, the Lord according to his very nature is that which is truth and wisdom and power, he is their essence."<sup>88</sup> It may be true that Solomon had "zeal for righteous judgment," but this zeal serves to signify "true judgment of all the earth."<sup>89</sup> Moreover, "he who is from David's seed [Christ] is the Lord according to the flesh. He was indicated beforehand by the one born from David [Solomon], as we learn by Scripture."<sup>90</sup> For Origen, the visit of the "Queen of Ethiopia" was *also* an allegory of the *ecclesia ex gentibus*, but for Gregory it functions entirely as a "mystery . . . which would be clear to he who understands from the evangelical wonders."<sup>91</sup> All these factors that were so carefully arranged by Origen to construct his philosophical author Solomon are here deconstructed by Gregory and subsumed into his image of the true author of the text, Christ. Once he has established that "Solomon's litter" is actually "Christ's litter" (his ostensible exegetical goal in this section of the *oratio*), Gregory can move on to delimit the audience of the Song's true meaning as the hierarchalized ascetical church. The construction of the litter<sup>92</sup> from "diverse materials" demonstrates that "God is in his worthies according to how much might and worth each one has in himself."<sup>93</sup> Therefore, this text is properly read as descriptive of a stratified church: "Should one wish to say that this litter is the universal Church, the litter's parts may be divided among persons according to their different abilities. For as was said earlier, the text (*logos*) has with great facility adapted to each of the orders laid out for the church the parts of the litter."<sup>94</sup> This image of the diversely constructed litter of Solomon-Christ translates smoothly into the "many mem-

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almost completely in favor of the present-day action of the soul. See also C.W. MacLeod, "Allegory and Mysticism," 373-5.

<sup>87</sup> Gregory, *Commentary, oratio* 7 (202, 13-14).

<sup>88</sup> Gregory, *Commentary, oratio* 7 (202, 16-203, 1).

<sup>89</sup> Gregory, *Commentary, oratio* 7 (204, 1-3). Gregory intertextualizes here two New Testament passages on the Lord's "judgment": John 5.22, 30.

<sup>90</sup> Gregory, *Commentary, oratio* 7 (204, 12-14): "as we learn by Scripture" probably refers to Rom. 9.5, where Paul describes Jesus as that one born to the Jews "according to the flesh." Interestingly, Origen also invoked the blood-relation of Solomon and Jesus as "the seed of David": "Perhaps these deer [in Song 2.9] may be taken as the saints, such as Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and David and Solomon and all those from whose seed descends 'Christ according to the flesh' [Rom. 9.5; cf. Matt. 1.1-7]" (Origen, *Commentary* 3.13.41 [SC 376, 646]). Here, the association with Christ *highlights* Solomon's historical significance, in contrast with Gregory.

<sup>91</sup> Gregory, *Commentary, oratio* 7 (204, 15-205, 5).

<sup>92</sup> Gregory, *Commentary, oratio* 7 (207, 12).

<sup>93</sup> Gregory, *Commentary, oratio* 7 (206, 12-14).

<sup>94</sup> Gregory, *Commentary, oratio* 7 (211, 6-11).

bers" in the one body of Christ.<sup>95</sup> With such an exegetical move—facilitated by the shift from Solomon-as-author to Solomon-as-Christ—Gregory can now intersperse New Testament passages that intertextually constrain the Song into a description of the ascetically hierarchalized church: "be imitators of me as I am of Christ"; "in the great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also wood and clay, and some are vessels of honor while others are vessels of dishonor"; "God has set up in the church first the apostles, second the prophets, third the teachers."<sup>96</sup> Such intertextual delimitation, combined with his authorial deconstruction, allows Gregory to elicit a precise meaning that aligns the body of the text with the body of Christ:

To this one he gives prophecy according to his measure of faith, while to that one he gives of the functions according to his nature and ability to receive grace, becoming an eye of the body of the church or designated as a hand or as a prop instead of a foot. Just so in the construction of chariot this one is a pillar, while that one becomes a step; another is the part for the head, acting as a headrest, while some others are designated for the interior.<sup>97</sup>

Later, the metaphorical body of Christ is entirely subsumed into the "litter of Solomon": "Through the names of these parts contributing to the litter's construction are signified priests, teachers, and the venerable state of virginity gleaming like the rays of stones inside the litter for the purification of virtues."<sup>98</sup> Once "Solomon" has been eradicated, and the shining ideal of pure Christ erected in his place, the text (*logos*) likewise merges more concretely into the divine Word (*Logos*) that, as the body of Christ, describes the ascetically hierarchalized church.

Here in the seventh *oratio* we see perhaps most clearly how Gregory defuses and redirects the authorial function initiated by his predecessor Origen. Exploiting the "plurality" of the authorial subject introduced by Origen (although there used in a way that did not obviate the human author who was so critical to the Alexandrian), Gregory ascribes the text now solely to the "true" Solomon, Christ. While so radically reassigning the authorial agency of the text—so that now it is no longer Solomon the ancient Hebrew but the "text" (*Logos*) itself that "philosophizes"—Gregory has also reconstructed the textual boundaries to define a community based on "purity," and not on "wisdom" as in Origen's commentary. "Philosophy" is no longer the quest for ultimate knowledge of God, but a "philosophy of life" defined

<sup>95</sup> Gregory, *Commentary*, *oratio* 7 (216, 4-5).

<sup>96</sup> 1 Cor. 11.1; 2 Tim. 2.20; 1 Cor. 12.28; Gregory, *Commentary*, *oratio* 7 (212, 3-4; 208, 6-8; 211, 11-13). Elizabeth A. Clark's forthcoming *Reading Renunciation* will no doubt be invaluable on the subject of intertextuality in ascetical exegesis.

<sup>97</sup> Gregory, *Commentary*, *oratio* 7 (210, 1-9).

<sup>98</sup> Gregory, *Commentary*, *oratio* 7 (211, 14-18).

by ascetic ideals.<sup>99</sup> The mystical text that originates from and circles back to Christ alone can now be reinscribed along the contours of “Christ’s body,” the ascetical church idealized by Gregory of Nyssa. The connection between these two “bodies” of Christ, the textual and the spiritual, is now so tightly secured that there is no room for the human agent, the philosopher “Solomon,” whose transgressive history makes him in any case practically irredeemable, except as a “type.” Only those most advanced in this “body of Christ,” who have achieved ascetic superiority, may in turn elicit true meaning from this mystical, ascetical text.

### *Conclusions*

While my focus has been the specific use and deployment of a Foucauldian author function, it has not been my intention to reduce the significance and utility of these two early Christian texts to the number of times they ascribe authorial agency to “Solomon.” Nor has it been my goal to imply that all the differences and similarities between the allegorical exegesis of Origen and Gregory can be summed up in their particular use of the construction of Scriptural “authors.” I have, however, operated under the assumption that texts convey meanings to the extent that readers are able and desire to see them. This is as much true for ancient Christian interpreters of Scripture as for modern historical readers of ancient Christian texts. From this standpoint, I have attempted to unravel a new thread of “meaning” that runs through the discursive construction of these socially charged hermeneutical endeavors. By demonstrating how the “author function” described by Foucault can be deployed to construct, and deconstruct, a particular authorial agency, I have attempted to underscore a wider discursive shift between Origen and Gregory in the construction of the ideal Christian subject, who is articulated in exegetical texts under the guise of the “correct reader.” By careful appropriation of the textual authority placed by the Christian community in sacred Scripture, thoughtful exegetes could direct and delimit that authority through the construction—or, in Gregory’s case, the *deconstruction*—of the text’s “author.”<sup>100</sup>

<sup>99</sup> On the Cappadocian Fathers’ articulation of the ascetical “philosophy of life,” see Susannah Elm, *“Virgins of God”: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 44-45 and note 50: “‘True philosophy’ was for many a synonym for Christianity . . . the word gains a more technical meaning in the specific usage of the Cappadocians”; 80-81, 107-108. See for example Gregory, *On Virginity*, Prologue (248, 6) and *Life of Macrina* (384, 1; 385, 10) for such uses of “philosophy” (text in Jaeger, ed., *Gregorii Nysseni: Opera Ascetica*, volume 8, part 1).

<sup>100</sup> For a discussion on the particular brand of institutionalized power implemented by Christianity, see Foucault, “The Subject and Power.” 214: Foucault defines “a special form of

Certainly there are ideas and concepts encoded in these commentaries that I have not touched on: they are vast and complex texts.<sup>101</sup> Additionally, I may be accused as easily as Origen or Gregory of deploying the author function in my own interpretation of their commentaries. I have certainly relied on historically reconstituted ideas of Origen, Gregory, and their respective *oeuvres*. But, as Foucault also points out, the author function "does not affect all discourses in the same way at all times and in all types of civilization."<sup>102</sup> I have not attempted simply to indict Origen or Gregory for constructing their own ideas of authorship: that is an act of reading that does not contain *ipso facto* ethical value. Instead, I have attempted to locate the significance of this activity of authorial construction within the mechanisms of power and knowledge in early Christian exegesis. Foucault uses the concept of the author function to shift the question from "who really spoke?" to "what difference does it make who is speaking?"<sup>103</sup> In early Christian interpretation of the Song of Songs, that prurient poem dripping with honey and perfume, it is precisely the "differences"—between insider and outsider, between the ideal reader of Origen and that of Gregory—which is in part elucidated by these particular constructive and deconstructive uses of the author function.<sup>104</sup> Reading and interpreting powerful texts is a way of wielding power, and the particular power wielded by Origen and Gregory was that of defining the true Christian subject. Describing the nature of the true "author" was for them a means of constructing not only the true "meaning," but also the true "reader," and of erecting cultural boundaries essential to the articulation of early Christian identity.

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power . . . 'pastoral power,' which "implies a knowledge of the conscience and the ability to direct it," and "is linked with the production of truth—the truth of the individual self."

<sup>101</sup> Especially significant—but impractical due to limitations of time and space—are the use and abuse of Plato and middle and neo-Platonism by the two authors and the subsequent influence and development of Origen and Gregory's exegetical trends. Fortunately, literature on these subjects is abundant.

<sup>102</sup> Foucault, "What is an Author," 113.

<sup>103</sup> Foucault, "What is an Author," 119-120.

<sup>104</sup> See also Cheryl Walker, "Feminist Literary Criticism and the Author," *Critical Inquiry* 16 (1990): 551-571: "The point is to consider what difference such a difference makes" (557).